

From the Beginnings to Jerome

Predictive prophecy was known and exercised by both the Egyptians and Babylonians. In such works as the *Admonition of Ipuwer* (twenty-third to twenty-second century B.C.), the *Teaching of Merikarē* and the *Prophecy of Neferty* (c. 1990 B.C.) there are allusions to the future, while the Babylonians cast descriptions of the reigns of unnamed kings in the form of prediction much as did Daniel (8: 23-5; 11: 3-14). Yet it is the rarity of this and other literary forms which contrasts with much of the Old Testament writings and with the unusual unity of theme and purpose in the selections there made. Against a literary background in which omina, astrology and myth play perhaps the largest rôle, their absence in the Old Testament is the more remarkable. The evidence of so rich and varied a literature throughout the Ancient Near East makes comparison and contrast with the biblical writings essential for the understanding of both. Moreover, it requires new approaches in our study of the Old Testament literature.

4. BOOKS IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD AND IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The world into which Christianity was born was, if not literary, literate to a remarkable degree; in the Near East in the first century of our era writing was an essential accompaniment of life at almost all levels to an extent without parallel in living memory. In the New Testament reading is not an unusual accomplishment; Jesus can clinch an argument with his opponents with 'Have you not read . . . ?' (Matt. 12: 3; 19: 4; cf. 21: 42), and reading may be assumed to have been as general in Palestine as, from the vast quantity of papyri of all kinds and descriptions, we know it to have been in up-country Egypt at this time. The hellenisation of the Near East contributed powerfully to the more general use of the written word; but although where books were concerned the sophisticated Judaism of Alexandria was influenced by the hellenic elements it sought to proselytise (as can be seen in Philo), a widespread use of the book was something that hellenism and Judaism, even in its more ultramontane forms, had in common. Both Greeks and Jews used the roll as the vehicle for their literature, although the latter tended to prefer skin to papyrus for copies of the Law read in synagogues, while to the Greek the use of papyrus was one of the marks of civilisation. Both used the waxed tablet for elementary instruc-

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tion in school as well as for memoranda. The discoveries at Qumrân and Murabba'ât have shown that certain scribal practices such as methods of cancellation or paragraphing by means of spacing were common to both, though probably Greek in origin.

Together with the widespread use of writing and reading, even though the reading list of the pious Jew was severely limited, went a distrust of the written word among Greeks and Jews alike. Plato's criticisms of the written word,¹ or at least of its abuse—that so far from helping memory, it destroys it, that it is no substitute for a true dialectic, or an exchange of minds between teacher and taught, that the profoundest truths cannot be put down in black and white—were frequently echoed in antiquity and (the Law always excepted) can be paralleled in Judaism. Some such attitude, as well as jealousy for the priority of the written Law, lay behind the prohibition on recording the oral Law in writing, or at any rate on transmitting or publishing it in written form; it was an attitude that powerfully influenced the early Church. Publication, in literary circles in Rome or Alexandria and equally in Christian circles, was always by public recitation. The story of the minister of Queen Candace whom Philip heard reading the book of Isaiah to himself (Acts 8: 28, 30) reminds us that reading in the ancient world, even solitary reading, invariably meant reading aloud.

But, as always with the Jews and usually with the Christians, it is the differences from the pagan world rather than the resemblances to it that impress. What we know as the Old Testament—and generally speaking its content was effectively fixed before the Christian era—occupied a place in Jewish national life, worship and sentiment to which classical antiquity offers no parallel. Greeks and Romans were acquainted with sacred books, whether those of minority groups such as Orphics or Pythagoreans or, as in Rome, belonging to the state, but the physical object was not treated with the same veneration nor the text itself so scrupulously protected as was the case with the Jewish Law. The strictest rules governed the handling, the reading and the copying of the Law. Multiplication of copies by dictation was not allowed; each scroll had to be copied directly from another scroll; official copies, until A.D. 70 derived ultimately from a master copy in the Temple, were kept at first in a cupboard in each synagogue, later

¹ *Phaedrus*, 274 f.

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in a room adjoining it. The cupboard faced towards Jerusalem, and the rolls within it were the most holy objects in the synagogue.

This reverence was not confined to the Hebrew text. Hellenised Jews regarded the Septuagint as a work of inspiration, an attitude that the story of its miraculous origin in the Letter of Aristeas reinforced, as it was surely intended to do. Thus for the Jews of the Diaspora and consequently for Christians, inspiration was not limited to the Hebrew tongue nor to a distant past; it was only after the Septuagint had been adopted by Christians as the text of the Old Testament that it fell into disfavour with the Jews and was replaced by other versions. For the earliest Christians it was both a datum of their religious life and a model for what in course of time became the New Testament. With this attitude went a concern for preserving the precise wording of the translated text; the Jewish rule that the sacred books must be read, not recited after being learnt by heart (as was the case with the uncanonised oral Law), itself contributed to the safeguarding of the text. The Church knew no such ban, but the general attitude to the sacred writings whether of the old or of the new dispensation was much the same.

The discoveries at Qumrân show that in the first century B.C. the text of Isaiah, for example, was faithfully transmitted; the widely varying interpretations that might be placed on the text by Jews as well as later by Christians, so far from leading to frequent variant readings, may well have defended it from them. An attitude to the text which regarded its careful reproduction almost as an end in itself implied a continuing process of transmission, control and supervision, something that in the Greek world could be found, and then with very different presuppositions, only in the small circle of professional scholars and writers.

The institutions in Judaism that at once enshrined this attitude to the Law, protected, and actively encouraged it, were the synagogue and the school, often closely associated, both devoted to the education of the nation in its religion.¹ The *lector* and the interpreter of the scriptures would have been no less familiar figures in the early churches than was

¹ Cf. Philo's picture of the Essene synagogues (*Quod omn. prob.* 81-2): 'these holy places are called synagogues, and there the young sit and are instructed in age groups by their elders, attending with suitable decorum. One takes the books and reads them aloud, another more learned comes forward and instructs them in what they do not know.' For the synagogue in general see G. F. Moore, *Judaism* (Harvard, 1927): I, 1, ch. v and in particular the other passages from Philo quoted on p. 306.

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the διδάσκαλος or teacher, as important in early Christian life as he was in Judaism. Paul's commission (1 Tim. 2: 7) was to be the teacher of the Gentiles, a commission executed directly when he is present, in his absence through his letters (1 Thess. 5: 27). In the church at Antioch (Acts 13: 1) there were teachers as well as prophets; in 1 Cor. 12: 28 teachers rank directly after apostles and prophets and in Eph. 4: 11 they are coupled with pastors as a recognised 'order' in the Church. The specific function of the teacher is as clearly recognised in the Apostolic Fathers.¹ Though the teacher himself need not be a writer of books any more than Jesus himself was, yet his activity implied that books were readily available. Christianity grew up with the idea, quite alien to the pagan world, that books were an essential part of religion. The growth of Christian literature and teaching and in due course of the Canon can only be understood in the light of practices inherited from Judaism.

Thus while a Jewish convert or sympathiser of the first generation would have found nothing strange in the attitude to and use of books, a Gentile convert would have been struck by the divergences from pagan practice. The physical object, however, would have been equally familiar to both. The Jewish preference for rolls of skin, instead of papyrus, remained, but except for certain cultic purposes it seems not to have been more than a preference. At Murabba'ât rolls, or parts of rolls, of the Old Testament have been found written both on leather and papyrus; and two pre-Christian rolls of the Septuagint from Egypt, both of Deuteronomy and in fine professional hands, are written on papyrus. A roll when complete would not normally have exceeded 35 feet, long enough to be a clumsy and unwieldy object; there were no rules governing the length of lines or the number of lines to a column and no numeration of columns. In the last there would have been little point, given the difficulty in a roll of making a quick reference. The detailed prescriptions for the manufacture and writing of rolls of the Law preserved in rabbinic sources should probably not be read back into the times of the Second Temple, and certainly have no analogue in Greek practice.

In the New Testament writings the book is a familiar object, under the names of βιβλος, the roll of papyrus and its diminutive βιβλίον, used both of books and documents. Thus it is the roll of Isaiah that

¹ *Did.* 13: 2; 15: 2; *Ep. Barn.* 1: 8; 4: 9; *Hermas, Vis.* III, 5, 1; *Sim.* IX, 15, 4.

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Jesus opens and reads from at Capernaum (Luke 4: 17); the βιβλία mentioned by the writer of the second epistle to Timothy may be assumed to have been rolls of the Old Testament (2 Tim. 4: 13). The sealed roll of Rev. 5: 2 alludes to the practice of sealing important documents such as wills. Metaphors from books and writing are evidence, if any were needed, of their universality; the most striking is that in which Paul, following a long tradition in Greek and Jewish literature (and in particular Prov. 3: 3), contrasts the word engraved on stone or wood with that written in the human heart. The bizarre passage in Revelation (10: 8 ff.) where an angel holds open a small roll and John takes and eats it echoes Ezek. 2: 8—3: 3 and is the only allusion to an opisthograph roll—one written on both sides—in the New Testament, occasionally, as here, with the same text running continuously from one side to the other. Nothing makes plainer the position held by the Old Testament than the use of γραφή, γραφαί, *writing, writings* without the addition of *holy* to denote *tout court* the Old Testament or its constituent books (see especially John 19: 37, *another writing*); the word may be classed among the relatively few religious *termini technici* in the New Testament.

Christian literature began, as did Christian preaching, with the interpretation of the Old Testament in the light of Christian experience (Acts 18: 28). It is significant that in the account of the post-Resurrection appearance to the eleven in Jerusalem the revelation of the true meaning of the scriptures ('Moses and the prophets and the psalms') is directly linked with 'these... my words': the holy writings of the past with the holy writings of the future (Luke 24: 44 f.). We find the same association between *the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken* in John (2: 22); here and in the preaching of Apollos in Achaia (Acts 18: 28) we can see at work the process by which the Christian interpretation of the scripture, associated as it usually was with the remembered words of the Lord, became as important and as indispensable as the scripture itself.

The literature of the earliest Church, in as far as we can picture it from the New Testament, is with two exceptions what might have been predicted from its Jewish origins: the sacred books of Judaism and some interpretations of those books in the light of Christian experience. The New Testament itself is composed of three classes of book. First,

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the gospels (and for this purpose Acts may be classified with them) which, whatever the claims made for their central figure, make no claim *as books* to be on a par with the Old Testament and whose purpose is succinctly stated in John 20: 31, 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name'. Secondly, the Epistles which (with the possible exception of Hebrews) do not set out to be literature, but originated as *pièces d'occasion*, half-way between ordinary correspondence and literature proper. Lastly, Revelation, the only work in the New Testament that claims inspiration, a claim deriving principally from the genre to which it belongs, partly perhaps from the late date of its composition.

The two exceptions, both of them clues to later developments, are the references to the *words of the Lord*, frequent enough to suggest that the authority they claim would eventually be recognised in a form permanent and independent of the Old Testament, and the seemingly trivial allusion in 2 Tim. 4: 13 to 'parchments'. The relatively few Latin words that occur in the New Testament are used to denote something peculiarly Roman, e.g. *πραπίτωριον* for which there is no obvious Greek equivalent; the use of *μεμβράναι* in this passage in place of the Greek *διφθέραι* (which would denote parchment or skin *rolls*) suggests a difference in the object. *Membranae* is found in Latin from the first century B.C. onwards for a parchment notebook (in which, for example, a poet might write his first drafts). This extension of the familiar wax tablet seems to have been a Latin invention; there is no evidence, literary or archaeological, for it in the Greek East.

What the notebook in question contained is a matter for conjecture; and what our conjecture is may depend on whether this section in the Epistle is considered to be Pauline and, if not, at what date it was written. There are good reasons for thinking that the first Christian book was a book of Testimonies, that is, of select passages from the Old Testament which could be interpreted as forecasting or confirming the gospel. Before gospel or even epistle was written the *searching of the scriptures* which Jesus attributes to the Jews with the comment 'it is they that bear witness to me' (John 5: 39) was actively pursued. Thus at Beroea sympathetic Jews 'received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so' (Acts 17: 11), and in Achaia Apollos, after he had been instructed by Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus, 'powerfully confuted the Jews in

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public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus' (Acts 18: 28). So Philip in Acts 8: 35 when he found Candace's minister reading aloud to himself 'beginning with this scripture [Isa. 53: 7-8] told him the good news of Jesus'. Some leaves from a papyrus codex containing just such a collection of *testimonia* have been discovered in Egypt, though the particular copy is not earlier than the fourth century. More significant because earlier is the discovery of a collection of proof texts about the Messiah in Cave IV at Qumrân,¹ a close parallel to New Testament usage, though the need for such a collection is sufficiently obvious for one not to have been the source of the other. In some of the Qumrân manuscripts, e.g. in one of the copies of Isaiah, special signs were employed to indicate passages of messianic significance; to this there is no parallel among the earliest Christian manuscripts.

Such collections of proof texts might not, at any rate at first, rate as books but would correspond to the notes or ὑπομνήματα sometimes kept of the teaching of rabbis or to the notebooks kept by an antiquarian such as the Elder Pliny. This would be one reason for the format denoted by μεμβράναι; another might be the ease of reference that a notebook, whether wooden tablet or parchment, offered to the travelling missionary.

The question posed by the frequent mention of *the words of the Lord* is both more important and more difficult to answer. That they were widely known and accepted as authoritative is clear from the New Testament, but it gives us no clue to the means of transmission, still less to the process by which or the date at which this material became fixed and began to constitute one of the principal elements in the gospel. Before it could be circulated (even though not published) in a regular written form, the objections felt in Judaism and consequently, we may suppose, in the earliest Christian communities, had to be overcome. This goes some way to explain the long-lived preference for the oral tradition that we find, for example, in Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor at the beginning of the second century. 'I thought', he wrote, 'that it was not so much what was taken from books that would help me as that which came from a living and still present voice' (referring to what he had heard directly from John the elder).² Eusebius following Clement and Papias compares Mark's Gospel with 'the un-

¹ See G. R. Driver, *The Judean Scrolls* (Oxford, New York, 1965), pp. 19, 527 f.

² Eus. *H.E.* III, 39, 4.

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written teaching of the *kerygma* of God',¹ reflecting a time when for some churches there was a choice between the two. No doubt the oral tradition was reinforced, as it was in Judaism, with notes; the contrast here is with a genuine book. The word ὑπόμνημα can be applied to a treatise as well as to notes; too much emphasis should not therefore be laid on Eusebius' allusion to the ὑπομνήματα² of the Lord's discourses, especially as a little later he refers to Mark and Luke 'having made publication of their gospels', using the word ἑκδοσις, the standard term for the public dissemination of any writing.

Nothing in this account obliges us to think of—for example—Mark's Gospel having grown by degrees out of the private notes used for the Jewish oral Law; equally 'publication' need not imply activity by the book trade so much as widespread distribution within the Church. We may surmise that even when some Gospels existed in the form known to us they were still not accepted as texts having the same authority as the Old Testament; that stage may well have coincided with the selection of the four as the final and complete record of the Church. A single inspired book, or group of books, was not in the first two generations felt to be necessary for the 'instruction in Christ' provided by the living tradition handed on from mouth to mouth, reinforced by circular letters from the leaders of the Church. Collections of such letters may have been second only to the collection of *testimonia* in the history of Christian literature.

If we were dependent on the few references in ancient authors, we would assume that the earliest Christian books were much the same in appearance as those in use in Jewish or Greek circles and might further infer, as many scholars since Harnack³ have done, that the Old Testament remained the only sacred scripture of the early Church until the second half of the second century. Both these views, which are closely connected, have been challenged by the discovery of Christian manuscripts, often very fragmentary, among the Egyptian papyri in the last 75 years. Towards the end of the nineteenth century and in the first thirty years of the twentieth, Christian papyri had been published, some of which, e.g. the so-called *Logia*, now known to be part of the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, excited great attention because

¹ *H.E.* II, 15, 1.

² *H.E.* III, 24, 5-7; cf. V, 8, 2-4 (quoting Irenaeus).

³ *Bible Reading in the Early Church* (Eng. trans. London, 1912), p. 41.

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of their content; when, as was often the case, they were written not on rolls, but in codex form, this was sometimes regarded as a ground for dating them later than the strictly palaeographical evidence would require, in ignorance or at any rate neglect of the allusions in pagan literature of the later first and early second century A.D. to the existence of the codex in the West. In the 1930s the publication first of the great series of Chester Beatty papyri containing very substantial parts of books of the Old and New Testaments together with some non-canonical works, followed by that of the Egerton Gospel in the British Museum and of the Rylands St John—all of them on papyrus, all codices—put the problem in a new perspective. Since then a collection hardly less important than that of Sir Chester Beatty, that of M. Bodmer in Geneva, together with other minor texts (among which may be mentioned some early fragments of the First Gospel divided between Magdalen College, Oxford, and Barcelona)—again all papyrus codices—have reinforced the conclusions to which the discoveries of the years before 1914 had in fact pointed. (It is possible, though not proven, that the Chester Beatty and Bodmer codices may have formed part of a single church library, accumulated over two centuries or more, and eventually deposited, in the Jewish fashion, in a Geniza; if this is so, it does not weaken their evidence.)

The evidence for dating the hands of literary papyri, consisting partly of exactly dated documents found together with and sometimes quite closely resembling the literary hands, partly of literary papyri for which a *terminus ante* or *terminus post* could be established, was now considerable. Though a precise and infallible dating is not possible, on all the criteria generally accepted by palaeographers certain of these Christian manuscripts—notably the Chester Beatty Numbers and Deuteronomy, the Egerton Gospel and the Rylands St John—were written in Egypt in the first half or about the middle of the second century, and the number of Christian manuscripts plausibly assigned to that century is now not less than twelve. They are not just notebooks, but parts of substantial books, some when complete running to a hundred pages or more; some were clearly professional productions. In passing it should be observed that there is no instance in Egypt of a papyrus notebook, i.e. folded sheets of papyrus equivalent to a multi-leaved tablet and used for memoranda, before the fourth century A.D., and none from Syria before the third.

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The contrast with pagan texts is striking. An analysis of pagan literary manuscripts from Egypt made some years ago gave the proportion of codices to rolls as 2.3% in the second century, 2.9% among those assigned to the border between the second and third centuries, 16.8% in the third, 48.1% on the borderline between third and fourth, 73.95% in the fourth. Subsequent publications have if anything increased the ratio of rolls in the second and third centuries. (A fair proportion of the earliest codices are what might be called sub-literary—technical or professional texts.) A survey of biblical texts from Egypt made at the same time yielded 99 codices and 12 rolls, and on closer examination even those 12 provided insecure evidence for the roll as a vehicle of the Bible in the early Church. Five were opisthograph—that is, on the verso of a roll already used for some other purpose, whether literary or documentary. Here the writer of the biblical text had no choice but to employ the roll form and the employment of such material is no evidence of the choice of the roll form as such: it was an obvious and much-used economy. Of the remainder three are certainly and six possibly Jewish. Only one is indubitably Christian, and that is a roll of the Psalms. No early manuscript of the New Testament known to us was written on the recto of a roll. All Christian manuscripts of the Bible, whether of the Old Testament or the New Testament, attributable to the second or the earlier third century, are codices, all written on papyrus.

Thus it is not so much a question of a preference for the codex as a deliberate and almost exclusive choice of it where the Bible was concerned. With Christian manuscripts other than biblical, practice varies; some, possibly because they were candidates for the Canon, others more probably on the analogy of the biblical texts, are in codex form; others, and not only scholarly treatises when pagan practices might be expected to be followed, but texts such as Tatian's *Harmony of the Four Gospels* (found at Dura Europos and so written before the destruction of the city in A.D. 256) and one of the Logia papyri, are in roll form. Although the parchment notebook was well established in Rome and though an enterprising publisher attempted to popularise the parchment book as a vade-mecum for travellers at the end of the first century A.D., legal writers in the middle of the third century could still dispute whether the definition of a book covered a codex. It was probably in consequence of strong Greek influence in cultural circles that only the roll was fully

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a book until at least the middle of that century. At this period there is no Greek word for codex; both the name and the object it denotes are unmistakably Western.

Various theories have been advanced to explain this odd addition on the part of the early Church (or at least on that of the Egyptian church, since there is no comparably early evidence for the rest of the world) for a novel form of book. In that both sides were fully and conveniently used, the codex was more economical than the roll; the early Church was not wealthy. On this ground we might expect a preference, hardly an addition; nor does this theory adequately explain either the abandonment of the roll for the Old Testament scriptures or its retention for some non-biblical texts. And in the earliest manuscripts, though not *éditions de luxe*, the writing is well spaced and the letters of normal size; nothing suggests that the scribe's first objective was to get the maximum of text into the minimum of space. Again, it has been urged that the greater capacity of the codex was an attraction, especially in the period when the Canon was being formed. But the earliest codices do not seem to have been of unusual capacity, though one held both Numbers and Deuteronomy, another Luke and John; the earliest of all probably carried the Fourth Gospel only. This consideration would hardly have carried weight before the establishment of the fourfold canon of the gospel; further, this theory too fails to explain the transfer of the Old Testament books from roll to codex by Christians. Thirdly, it has been rightly said that the codex was more convenient than the roll for the traveller and the missionary, with its numbered pages easier to consult, in its compact shape perhaps easier to conceal. But pagan teachers and Jewish missionaries did not abandon the roll (as the Testimony roll from Qumrân illustrates). Convenience may have been a factor; it cannot have been decisive.

Another hypothesis may be found in the Roman origin of the codex. The earliest Christian congregations in Rome who would have been literate, but hardly literary in their interests, would have needed, apart from the sacred rolls of the Old Testament or letters from apostles or other churches, some notes for the day-to-day teaching of converts, whether *testimonia* from the Old Testament or records of what was later incorporated in the gospels. In their ordinary business life the tablet, both in waxed wood and in parchment, would have been familiar. This may well have been the form in which, according to the

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account recorded by Papias and transmitted by Eusebius, Mark reduced to writing Peter's reminiscences, not long after Peter's death. The work, intended for private circulation among the faithful, may well have kept the form of the parchment notebook (cf. *μεμβράναι* in 2 Tim. 4: 13), even if later elaborated into what we know as the Second Gospel. (Incidentally, the last leaf of a codex is far more likely to be torn or lost than the last column of a roll, protected by being on the inside.) Certainly the papyrus codex of Egypt must have had a parchment predecessor; since papyrus is hardly a natural material for this format (and notebooks of papyrus are unknown at this period), it is difficult to see where, if not at Rome, this could have originated.

A tradition that goes back to the second century associates Mark with the foundation of the Church of Alexandria, a minor founder figure for a major church. This may point to some early connection between Rome and Alexandria, probable enough on other grounds; the theory that Mark's Gospel at a very early date was accepted in Alexandria and consequently throughout Egypt as a fundamental statement of faith might account for the facts. For, once in Egypt, it would have been copied and recopied on the native material, papyrus,¹ and some of the respect and authority attributed to the content must have been accorded to the form. The next stage was reached when the codex was established as the proper form not only for this Gospel, but for all the texts that later formed the New Testament and, significantly, for Christian copies of the Old Testament as well.

It is this latter development that is the more striking, as it marks the independence of the Church from Jewish traditions and practices and points the way to the formation of the Christian Canon. We possess codices of Old Testament books, or fragments of them, from the first half of the second century, and consequently this break with the past, which must have seemed impious to a Jew, probably took place not much later than the turn of the century. The adoption of the codex for specifically Christian texts (including for example the Third Gospel and Acts, which, being addressed to the Graeco-Jewish world and having some literary pretensions, would naturally have been published in roll form) would have occurred somewhat earlier, the authority attached to Christian texts being such that they determined the format

¹ Only two classical MSS. from Egypt on parchment and probably antedating the third century are known.

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of the Old Testament books used in the Church rather than vice versa. This process must have begun—not necessarily in Egypt—well in the first century; some complementary evidence of this may be found in the papyri themselves.

In Jewish copies of the Greek versions of the scriptures it was usual for the name of God, Yahweh, to be written in Hebrew letters (the name itself being pronounced Adonai, Lord, in reading aloud), sometimes by a second hand, the place for it being indicated by spacings or dots. This treatment of the Tetragrammaton provided a precedent for what palaeographers know as *nomina sacra* in Christian manuscripts. Certain words of religious significance were singled out for special treatment by scribes (except of course where the word occurred in a secular context, e.g. θεός of pagan gods or πνεῦμα in the sense *wind*). The ordinary Greek habit of indicating the symbols for numerals, ordinal and cardinal, and other non-words by a line placed over the letter or letters concerned, as a warning to the reader necessary in texts with no word division, was wedded to the Hebrew practice of omitting the vowels (in Greek, the vowels of the stem). The *nomina sacra* are thus contracted by the omission of certain vowels and sometimes of consonants and the contraction indicated by a line placed above it, a construction unknown to Greek or Hebrew writing. The four key words are θεός, κύριος, Ἰησοῦς and χριστός. The last two are invariably contracted (with the non-significant exception of the very rare scribal error); with the other two confusion occasionally arises because of their secular as well as their religious connotation. The system was extended to other words, but the degree of consistency in usage varies; it need not concern us here, any more than the theological significance of the selection of some words and the omission of others for such treatment.

The system must first have been applied to specifically Christian manuscripts, in keeping with the interest in symbolism of which there are traces in the New Testament. As a second stage it was used in Christian manuscripts of the Old Testament; it is already found in some of the oldest Christian papyri of the Old Testament (in others the surviving fragments are too small to yield instances of the relevant words), notably in the Chester Beatty Numbers and Deuteronomy. In this codex written in the first half of the second century the words contracted include not only κύριος and Ἰσραήλ but Joshua = Jesus. The habit of contracting the name Jesus as a mark of reverence must

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have been very well established for a scribe to slip into using it as a matter of course when the same name occurred in an Old Testament book. That the practice of *nomina sacra* reaches back into the first century is strongly suggested by a passage in the anti-Jewish *Epistle of Barnabas* (written towards the close of the century). Here the number (318) of Abraham's followers as given in Gen. 14: 14 is explained on the ground that the Greek letter *tau* = 300 stands for the Cross, while the letter for 18 (*iota* followed by *eta*) stands for the name Jesus. This is one of the forms of the *nomen sacrum* for Jesus.

The transference of the Law from its sacrosanct form to a format of no antiquity and little regard, sanctioned only by its use for the Gospels, must have seemed to the Jew an act of sacrilege; the further step of employing the *nomina sacra*, of not inserting the Hebrew name in the Greek text and of treating other names with equal reverence must have seemed blasphemy. At this point, some time in the first century, we may place the beginnings of the Christian Canon. With this appropriation of the Hebrew scriptures as the true inheritance not of Judaism, but of the Church, and their assimilation to the form and scribal patterns of the new religion, would naturally go an independence in the choice of what constituted scripture; the fact that some book or books—which we do not know—provided a model for the transcription of the Old Testament suggests that a Christian Canon was beginning to take shape.

It would however be a mistake to suppose that the development of the Christian Bible was straightforward and simple. Some books of the Old Testament, especially the Law and the Psalms, would have been the essential equipment of any church from the earliest days; for the sayings of the Lord a prejudice in favour of the direct oral tradition as a reliable and living witness lingered in some circles at least for a long time. Just as Irenaeus memorised what Polycarp told him of his direct knowledge of John, recorded 'not on papyrus but in my heart',¹ so Papias preferred the oral to the written record. None the less, Papias wrote a commentary on the sayings of the Lord² (which surely assumes the existence in writing of the *logia* in question), just as the gospel was a datum for Irenaeus. The earliest Christian missions relied on eye-witness accounts; this was their strength and goes far to explain the persistence of the oral tradition.

¹ Eus. *H.E.* v, 20, 7.

² *Ibid.* II, 39, 1 f.

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Our earliest Christian manuscripts have much in common. All (with a single exception from the third century) come from Egypt; all were found by excavation. There are twelve plausibly assigned to the second century; ten of these carry texts of the Bible, seven of the Old Testament, three of the New Testament. All ten are written on papyrus, all are codices. The New Testament texts are a fragment of the Fourth Gospel (probably the earliest manuscript of them all), a much more extensive though later manuscript containing most of the same Gospel in 108 pages, and a fragment of the Epistle to Titus. Of the Old Testament texts two are of the Psalms, two of Genesis, one of Exodus; while the sixth contained both Exodus and Deuteronomy, the seventh Numbers and Deuteronomy. It is no surprise that the Pentateuch and the Psalms were of all Old Testament books the most read in the early Church; with Isaiah they are the most quoted books in the New Testament. Of the two remaining manuscripts in this oldest group one is the Egerton Gospel, written about the middle of the century on a papyrus codex; the other is a text of the *Shepherd* of Hermas, written on the back of a local government register from the Fayûm, probably a copy made locally for the church in Arsinoe, the capital of the Fayûm; it has been specially marked for reading aloud. Of manuscripts on the borderline between the second and third centuries there may be mentioned a fragment of Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* written on a roll in a fine literary hand, a papyrus codex of Matthew, again a professional production, two more manuscripts of the Psalms, the Chester Beatty Pauline epistles (a codex that when complete ran to 208 pages) and the two *logia* manuscripts now known to belong to the Gospel of Thomas.

Not many generalisations can usefully be made about this earliest group of manuscripts. But it is noticeable that many of them, though well and clearly written, are the work not of professional literary scribes, but of fluent writers who, used to writing, tried hard for the most part to write in bookhands, but betray the documentary styles with which they were more familiar, frequently in the use of ligature, sometimes in letter forms. Since precisely dated documents survive in abundance from the first three centuries, this is an aid to dating. It is significant that the scribe of the Chester Beatty Numbers and Deuteronomy, when he comes to write the Greek for centurion, uses the abbreviation familiar in military and official documents, while the

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Baden Deuteronomy, the style of which is of all the closest to that of contemporary documents, was found together with a document written in the same hand. (It is also worth noting that we do not know of a single case of the same scribe writing a Christian and a secular manuscript.) This confirms what in any case might have been guessed, that the earliest manuscripts were the product not of the book trade but of communities whose members included businessmen and minor officials well used to writing. A few however are in an unmistakable literary hand with only occasional documentary reminiscences such as can also be found in secular manuscripts.

These books have no uniform format, but there are two which are favoured, one in which the height of the page is nearly twice the width, the other in which the page makes approximately a square, either of six inches or of eight. All are eminently practical books. Pages are usually numbered, but even in the best manuscripts the number of lines to a page varies considerably. The hands are not cramped and do not suggest a desire for economy; as far as we can tell, none of these early codices contained more than two books of the Pentateuch, whereas in the third century more capacious codices, that for example of the Chester Beatty four Gospels and Acts, are frequent. The oldest of all, the Rylands St John, would have had to consist of 132 pages, whether in separate quires or, as was often the case, in a single quire, to take the whole Gospel. Codices were not composed of separate leaves already written; their make-up, the varying number of lines to the page and the fact that pages are not planned to end with a section or a sentence, all tell against the view that particular features in the books as we know them can be explained by transposition of pages.

With few exceptions the New Testament is composed of books that either are anonymous or are explicitly non-literary; whose status as books is conferred on them by time and use. Our early copies of them are no more private copies than they are book trade copies; not addressed to the world at large, they were the products of a community, and the community saw to their dissemination. (In classical literature some analogy may be found in the circulation of Aristotelian or Epicurean texts.) In Colossians we read of letters being exchanged and copied between Colossae and Laodicea;¹ at this stage there is no thought of the formation of a library, but when the same practice is alluded to

¹ Col. 4: 16.

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in Polycarp¹ and Ignatius,² we may be sure that the Church regarded such copies as part of their archives, if not of their libraries. The clearest reference to the 'publication' of Christian texts is to be found in the *Shepherd* of Hermas:³ 'You shall write then', says the Lady to Hermas in his vision, 'two little books and you shall send one to Clement and one to Graptē. Clement shall then send them to the cities overseas, for that is his duty; Graptē shall admonish the widows and the orphans; but in this city [Rome] you shall read them yourself together with the priests that have the charge of the Church.'

On the rapid circulation of literature among the churches and on its regular and public reading much of the coherence of the early Church must have depended; libraries and archives would have been as essential an element in them as they were in the synagogues. The remarkably uniform system of *nomina sacra* discussed above suggests that at an early date there were standard copies of the Christian scriptures, much as before the destruction of Jerusalem the authoritative copy of the Law was preserved in the Temple. The unvarying use of the codex, so marked in the Egyptian church, may have been the result of direct Roman influence and, for all we know, may not have extended beyond Egypt until the third century; the uniformity in *nomina sacra* may point to a more general rule.

Community control may explain the relative absence of 'wild' texts among New Testament manuscripts, very marked if we compare them with those of the *Acta Pauli* or of *The Shepherd*. M. Dibelius⁴ has suggested that the existence of the marked divergences in the readings of the Western Text of Luke and Acts (more striking in these books than in any others) is explained on the ground that there were two editions: one sold through the book trade and addressed to the sympathetic hellenised Jew or pagan, the other circulating in the Christian communities; since the text of Acts was adapted for liturgical purposes later than that of Luke, it is wilder because it was later in gaining the protection of community use and control. We might add that persecution may have prevented the trade edition from enjoying a prolonged circulation and that the text of Luke may have suffered less because it was protected relatively early by the single codex of the four Gospels. This is guesswork; we have to admit that we know as little of the

¹ *Phil.* 13: 2.

² *Smyrn.* 11: 3; *Philad.* 10: 1; *Murt. Pol.* 27, 2.

³ *Vis.* 2 end.

⁴ *JR*, xxi (1941), 421 f.

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organisation and circulation of early Christian literature as we do of the finances of the early Church.

If we ask who was responsible for copying, and on the whole copying accurately, the Christian scriptures, the answer is again largely a matter of surmise; matters taken for granted are rarely recorded. Remains of a scriptorium have been found at Qumrân and of that community it has been said 'copying was the earliest and principal task of the Community, as of Christian monks'.¹ The Church in the world was in a different situation but the obligation may have been felt to be no less heavy than it was in orthodox Judaism.

In the early second century the variety in the types of hands and the documentary influence visible in some of them tell against the hypothesis of central scriptoria. In the latter part of the century radical changes in this as in other spheres of Church life took place. We can infer from Celsus and Lucian that Christian books were accessible enough; with the establishment of the Catechetical School in Alexandria, a lay institution, the techniques of classical scholarship, mingled with the tradition of Jewish exegetes, began to be applied to Christian texts. To it would have been attached a scriptorium which was probably the model for that which Origen established with the help of a wealthy friend at Caesarea and for the library in Jerusalem founded by Bishop Alexander some time after A.D. 212. Eusebius' account of Origen's scriptorium at Caesarea—surely the first reference on record to the employment of women stenographers²—suggests that in its use of shorthand it looked back to the ancient world, as in its specialised and enclosed activity it foreshadowed the cathedral scriptoria of the Middle Ages. His assistants were skilled not only in shorthand but in calligraphy; from now on Christian book production was on a level with that in the pagan world. The purpose of the scriptorium was to produce copies of the Bible and biblical commentaries; the earliest liturgical books among the papyri are nearly a century later.

Details of scribal procedure—punctuation, quotation marks, signs of omission and deletion—were much the same in Greek and Jewish manuscripts and were naturally adopted in Christian books. What was peculiar to the Jews was the veneration for the manuscript as the incarnation of the Law and consequent on this, especially after the

¹ G. R. Driver, *The Judaean Scrolls* (Oxford, New York, 1965), p. 359.

² *H.E.* vi, 23, 2.

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destruction of the Jewish state, scrupulous care in the minutest detail of its production. Though Jewish scrupulosity is not paralleled in the early Church and we know of no minute regulations governing the production of the text, something of respect for the text and the manuscript was transmitted to the Church. Just as the pious Jew never lived far from a copy of the Law, so Abercius Marcellus, bishop of Hieropolis in Phrygia towards the close of the second century, in his famous inscription¹ claims that Paul, i.e. the Pauline epistles, was his travelling companion and praises the Church as the teacher of 'sound writings'. Evidence for the care taken in copying and correcting can be found both in early writers² and in the early papyri themselves, though we cannot be sure if equal care was taken with Christian records and books before they were set on the path to ultimate canonisation; the first years of any book's life are always the most dangerous for the text.

Christian culture and education were bookish through and through; reliance on the book, initially a legacy from Judaism, was soon a weapon of the Church in its fight against paganism. This ensured that the specifically Christian preaching would be transmitted in writing at an early date, but it was transmitted with a difference. *Tertium genus dicimus*:³ the history of Christian manuscripts in the first three centuries mirrors in small the relation of the Church to Judaism on the one hand and to hellenism on the other, a relationship of alternate repulsion and attraction, of derivation as well as of originality. 'We are so accustomed', wrote A. D. Nock,⁴ 'to the Church as a fact of life that we do not always realise how remarkable a phenomenon it was—differing from synagogue and from pagan cult group; the total novelty of the Church manifested itself early... the Christian movement from the beginning shows both continuity and cultural break.' On that text the manuscripts of the first three centuries, written occasionally on rolls as well as in codices, employing the usual scribal conventions as well as *nomina sacra*, offer an apt gloss.

¹ *Reallexikon f. Antike u. Christentum*, 1, s.v. *Aberkios*.

² E.g. Eus. *H.E.* v, 20, 2.

³ Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, 8.

⁴ In *JBL*, LXVII (1948), 257.

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